

7) PARABLE OF THE TALENTS IN MATTHEW AND LUKE

Matthew 25. 14-29

The Parable of the Talents

14 'For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. ¹⁹After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, "Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents." ²¹His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." ²²And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, "Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents." ²³His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." ²⁴Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; ²⁵so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." ²⁶But his master replied, "You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? ²⁷Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. ²⁹For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.

COMMENTARY

This parable is one given by Jesus before he dies. It is meant to give instructions to his disciples on how they should live between the time of his departure and his second coming. It's about what to do with what you're given.

There are at least five points that can be made.

1) A person's ability determines the number of talents they are given. 2) The talents are given in order to multiply them. A talent was a large sum of money, a lifetime of wages for some. The talents, used well, will produce more talents, more blessings, more riches and benefits. 3) It doesn't take great brilliance or skill to multiply the talents. Basic investment can produce some multiplication. What's required is a willingness to risk, to make some effort, to take some steps. 4) What prevents the talents from multiplying? Fear; neglect, thoughtlessness, indifference; lack of conviction or motivation. 5) The concept of abilities (how we're made) and resources (talents, what we're given) is a helpful one. Both our abilities and our resources/talents are entrusted to us by God. All belongs to God. We belong to God.

Jesus' role is to inspire and motivate us to multiply what we're given to God's glory. We can think of talents and their use as multiplying the effects of compassion and service with the particular abilities and opportunities we're given and how we make use of them.

Luke 19. 11-26

The Parable of the Ten Pounds

11 As they were listening to this, he went on to tell a parable, because he was near Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately. ¹²So he said, 'A nobleman went to a distant country to get royal power for himself and then return. ¹³He summoned ten of his slaves, and gave them ten pounds, and said to them, "Do business with these until I come back." ¹⁴But the citizens of his country hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, "We do not want this man to rule over us." ¹⁵When he returned, having received royal power, he ordered these slaves, to whom he had given the money, to be summoned so that he might find out what they had gained by trading. ¹⁶The first came forward and said, "Lord, your pound has made ten more pounds." ¹⁷He said to him, "Well done, good slave! Because you have been trustworthy in a very small thing, take charge of ten cities." ¹⁸Then the second came, saying, "Lord, your pound has made five pounds." ¹⁹He said to him, "And you, rule over five cities." ²⁰Then the other came, saying, "Lord, here is your pound. I wrapped it up in a piece of cloth, ²¹for I was afraid of you, because you are a harsh man; you take what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow." ²²He said to him, "I will judge you by your own words, you wicked slave! You knew, did you, that I was a harsh man, taking what I did not deposit and reaping what I did not sow? ²³Why then did you not put my money into the bank? Then when I returned, I could have collected it with interest." ²⁴He said to the bystanders, "Take the pound from him and give it to the one who has ten pounds." ²⁵(And they said to him, "Lord, he has ten pounds!") ²⁶"I tell you, to all those who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.

COMMENTARY

This parable is similar to Matthew's version except for a few differences. The currency is pounds rather than talents. Also, everyone gets the same amount to invest (one pound each). Finally, the story is about a nobleman going on a journey in order to receive royal power. Think about Jesus dying and rising from the dead and then becoming exalted at the right hand of God, and returning again as exalted Lord to reign on earth. But we're not told any of this in the parable itself.

What is further interesting in this parable is that the reward of the servants for investing well and multiplying the pounds is that they are given greater responsibility (cities to rule). Using our abilities and opportunities well so that others are helped and blessed means 1) people will trust us more and entrust us with more as a result; and 2) people will consult us, look for us and bless us more and more for what they've received through our ministry to them. The key is not how much we've done or how much we've multiplied our gifts. The person who makes 10 is no better than the person who makes 1. However, some people can handle greater responsibility than others, and that's just the reality of our differences as people and the cards we've been dealt by life. The judgment falls on those who do nothing with what they're given. Judgment falls on them in the sense that we often reap what we sow. We can only give to people what we cultivate in ourselves.

A PARABLE OF FORGIVENESS IN MATTHEW

Matthew 18. 23-35

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

23 'For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; 25and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. 26So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." 27And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. 28But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." 29Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." 30But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. 31When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. 32Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" 34And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. 35So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

COMMENTARY

1) In Matthew's gospel, the theme of judgment is always present in the parables. Someone has to pay. However, several interesting things about judgment are said. First of all: we are not to judge as human beings (Matthew 7), but only God has the right and credibility to judge. Second, God makes no judgments of people in this life. The weeds and the wheat grow together (13:24-30), God makes rain fall and sun shine upon good and bad alike (5:45), servants asked to invite people to the master's banquet are told explicitly to make no distinctions between good and bad, but invite all (22:10). Only in the last judgment, which is subject to God's discernment, will good be vindicated and bad be punished (25: 31-45). Given that all human beings have some measure of bad in them, we learn to lean on the mercy and grace of God above all.

2) The king begins harshly, but ends up acting incredibly mercifully. 1st century Palestinian law only required that the debtor himself be sold to slavery not his family. The king initially requiring this is a harsh judgment. However, upon the pleading of the servant for mercy, the king not only relents, but totally forgives the debt. And in case we may think the debt is a minimal sum, 10,000 talents are anything but. 1 Talent would be about 15-20 years' worth of salary for a typical worker. 10,000 talents are the kind of sum that could never be repaid in a lifetime. We are not told how the servant got into such great debt. Judgment is not made on his financial mismanagement, irresponsibility and so forth. All we witness is the human to human contact between a desperate man who has messed up big, and another man who allows the pain of the man to enter him

and change his heart. Forgiveness begins by a conversion in our hearts. Then we are opened to approach the offender altogether differently.

3) The servant is contrasted to the king. Whereas the king started out as a harsh man and ended up incredibly merciful, the servant starts out incredibly forgiven and ends up shockingly harsh. In contrast to the astronomical sum he owed the king, he is owed a negligible sum. And instead of forgiving this debt, he wants the debtor to pay the maximum possible penalty. We may have little sympathy for him as a result.

4) We may have little sympathy for the unforgiving servant, but his punishment seems unusually harsh. But remember who Matthew's critical focus is aimed at: the religious/political/ wealthy/hypocritical leaders of Israel. They are so busy pointing fingers at the morally fallen of society, they fail to recognize God's incredible graciousness to them. Their uncompromising harshness will fall against them on the day of judgment.

For next week: Luke 15.